

CANTON REPOSITORY (OH)

12 May 1986

Keeping secrets

A The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, William J. Casey, with the general support of the Reagan White House, is trying to persuade Justice Department attorneys that they should prosecute five newspapers and magazines.

Casey is claiming that the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Washington Times, and Time and Newsweek magazines, published articles about intelligence gathering that violate federal law. The articles apparently deal with U.S. ability to intercept Libyan communications, a key element in gaining the proof the United States needed to link Libya with the terrorist bombing of a West German nightclub.

Casey also threatened the Washington Post with prosecution if it goes ahead with plans to publish an article about the National Security Agency, an agency that deals with intercepting coded communications. The Washington Post editors said they did not believe Casey's claim that the article would jeopardize national security, but they voluntarily withheld publication until they could be more sure of the consequences themselves.

This shows a good faith on the part of the American press that is not appreciated by the administration. It is not surprising that the Reagan White House is interested in supporting such prosecution. During his years in the White House, President Reagan has revealed either a misunderstanding or a contempt for the function of the free press in American society.

CIA Director Casey is venturing into a constitutional bramble bush, which the nation should hope will snare him.

The issue is not a lack of concern for national security. It is a concern for press freedom, which the people of this nation in their wisdom have held to be one of the nation's most vital principles. In no nation on Earth do the citizens enjoy such a free flow of ideas and information by which they can judge whether their servant — the government — is doing an acceptable job.

We hope that the prosecutors in the Justice Department, whose job it would be to carry out prosecution against these newspapers and national magazines, will politely decline the challenge, for the good of the nation. We hope this happens even though superiors in the White House might wish to slug it out with the press, which they mistakenly perceive to be some enemy.